

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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FOR WEDNESDAY RELEASE

MUSEUM TO SHOW LARGEST RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION OF WORK BY

PHILADELPHIA PAINTER, FRANKLIN C. WATKINS

(Note: Mr. Watkins will be on hand for the critics' preview on Tuesday, 2-5 p.m.)
On March 22 the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, will open the largest retrospective exhibition ever held of paintings by Franklin C. Watkins, who is particularly noted for his fine portraits and his paintings on religious themes, both rare subjects among most modern artists. Fifty-four works, including 47 canvases, 3 panels and some watercolors will make up the exhibition, which will be on view in the Museum's third floor galleries until June 11.

Of special interest are Watkins' largest and most recent works: two huge canvases, Death and Resurrection, shown for the first time outside of Philadelphia and for the first time anywhere accompanied by their preliminary paintings.

Andrew C. Ritchie, Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture, has organized the exhibition and has written the accompanying book on Mr. Watkins which is illustrated with two plates in color and 41 in black and white.

Although born in New York, Franklin Watkins, now aged 55, has spent most of his working life in Philadelphia, where like Charles Demuth, whom he knew and whose work is also currently being exhibited on the Museum's third floor, he had an academic training at the venerable Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Here he joined other students in revolt against the strict discipline in anatomy, preferring to draw his color and form from the post-impressionists; and the whole panorama of his work shows him to be above all a colorist.

After study abroad on two fellowships, Watkins returned home to find family financial reverses, forcing him to work in an advertising agency. Never prolific, Watkins' few early works produced in spare time from his job showed the influence now of Eakins, whom he greatly admired; now of Cézanne, Gauguin and Picasso. Later, the characteristics of his mature painting, according to Andrew Ritchie, were: "The strong emphasis on diagonals..., the large sweeping rhythms, the easy command of forms in space, the expressionistic

distortions of exaggerations of feature or gesture, the humorous mood... and the romantic implications...."

Overnight Watkins won fame in 1931 when he was given first prize at the Carnegie International Exhibition for Suicide in Costume, which, though then highly controversial, caught the public fancy and was widely reproduced throughout the country, probably because it somehow seemed to epitomize the depths of the then current depression and its suffering.

Watkins' first one-man show was held in 1934 in New York. This year he also designed sets and costumes for Transcendence, a ballet set to music by Liszt, and completed his painting, The Fire Eater, of which he has said: "The flame interested me, and the flame within (eaten) somehow seemed to suggest, if I remember correctly, a continuous movement through the core of the figure." Later exhibitions of Watkins' work were held, in 1938, at Smith College; in 1942, at the Arts Club of Chicago; in 1946, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Some of America's finest portraits today have been painted by Watkins despite the fact that this is a period during which most modern artists have avoided portraiture for fear of conventional restrictions. "Watkins, without sacrificing his independence of expression or giving in to conventions," writes Mr. Ritchie, "has succeeded in dignifying his sitters by going beyond mere likeness and studio pose and painting a picture first of all." Outstanding among the portraits is his Justice Owen J. Roberts.

The numerous paintings of a religious nature are done with very personal and poetic interpretations of religious scenes. Mr. Henry McIlhenny of Philadelphia saw and liked a Resurrection done in 1943, and he commissioned the two huge canvases (9' by 14'4"), Death and Resurrection, for his music room walls. Watkins spent 2½ years on these recently finished canvases. Of them he says:

"This commission from its beginning to its completion has been the most interesting and engrossing undertaking in my life. As to the religious aspect of these pictures, all I can say is that I needed a subject powerful enough to carry me through an undertaking that might prove to be too much for me. I saw no reason why in a private house, in a music room, thoughts like this might not be appropriate; no reason why such thoughts should be confined to Sunday morning

from 11 to 12.

"The Bible is a wonderful source of material. These pictures are not literal, the way the events were supposed to have taken place; they are thoughts that come in reading about those events. We don't paint things but thoughts of things.

"In the earlier Resurrection I liked the idea of throwing bouquets of many little winged figures at the canvas - I liked angels' wings as extensions of gestures. But when I saw how big the new canvases were, these little bright figures appeared to jump out too much. It seemed more appropriate to mute the whole conception; the facial expressions are more hushed, the death figure is shrouded, the composition is more organized."

Three pictures by Franklin Watkins were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1930, the year before he won the Carnegie International prize. This was the first time his work had ever been shown in a museum. The exhibition, entitled "45 Painters and Sculptors under 35 Years of Age," included his "Return," "Musician" - both in the current exhibition - and "Nude in Interior," pictures which attracted considerable interest in the early showing.